

A River Story

I don't remember my birthday. I was formed a long, long time ago by the glaciers. For years and years I was alone except for the animals that lived near me and the fish that lived in me. Then Native Americans began to travel on top of me in their canoes. That often tickled! They created a gathering place and trading center along my shores.

In the early 1700s, French traders paddled in me. They built a fort and settlement along my narrowest part. I was very important to them. They used me for food and drinking water. They washed their clothes in me. They traveled on me.

Slowly their settlement grew into a town called Detroit, which is where I got my name. Flour mills and grain elevators grew up along my banks. Long wooden piers were built into me to handle all the boats coming and going on top of me.

I was filled with fish then, especially whitefish and lake sturgeon. People fished and fished in me. They began to export whitefish from Detroit to other places. They were not fond of my sturgeon, which were very big fish. Fisherman said they just messed up their nets! But there were so many of them that they started burning them for fuel on the new-fangled steamboats that had begun to appear on me.

By 1825, the Erie Canal opened. The canal also carried boats, but it was built by people. After the canal opened, people could now travel by water from New York to my friend, Lake Erie, and onward

to me. Many new people came to Detroit by boat. There were lots of new buildings along my banks.

In the 1850s I was called “Route Number 1” on the Underground Railroad. I was the road to freedom for thousands of escaped slaves. I’ve always been very proud of that.

After the Civil War, Detroit grew and grew. Shipyards for building and repairing ships sprung up all along me. I got busier and busier. By the late 1800s, Detroit had become the busiest port in the world. I was one of the busiest rivers. I hardly ever got any sleep! More tons of cargo passed over me than rivers in London and New York. I was amazed I could float all that weight!

By 1898 people began to look at me for recreation not just transportation. That year the Bob-Lo Excursion Line opened and boats began to take people out to one of my islands for picnics and celebrations. That same year Detroit bought Belle Isle, one of my favorite islands. There were plans to make that island into a huge

city park. People began to see me as a way to escape the rush of city living.

In the early 1900s a new industry grew up that would change both Detroit and me forever. This was the automobile industry. More factories and steel mills began to appear along my banks. The automobile industry grew and grew. More and more ships traveled on me. They brought iron ore in from the north and exported cars out many other places.

Smoke began to fill the sky over me. Chemicals, sewage, and other pollutants were poured into me. My whitefish and sturgeon began to disappear. Parking lots and fences appeared along me blocking my view of the land. Old, abandoned factories could be seen along my banks . . . not a pretty site! I looked like I might be a dying river.

Slowly things have improved. People have begun to care about me again. Now my water is getting cleaner and clearer. Fish are beginning to swim in me again. I even have a little sparkle like I did when those Native American canoes first traveled on me. They are building a lighted path along me from Joe Louis Arena to the Renaissance Center so people can see and enjoy me again. They've even started a wildlife preserve along my shores. And, I'm

proud to say that I have been named an official American Heritage
River... not bad for a river that is just 32 miles long!